

Brief Notes

LITTLE BLACK PANTHER

Richard Muirhead uncovered an interesting news account (Van Smith 1960) that describes a small black panther-like feline seen in the Everglades National Park region of southern Florida. From the news story:

Everglades National Park authorities have a full size mystery on their hands in the form of a 'what-is-it?' animal.

The mystery is 10 years old—since the first sighting—but the story has never been told before because no scientist has been able to come up with the answer.

No one believes that this is a creature from outer space, let down by a space ship, but authorities do believe when the enigma is solved it may very well prove sensational.

The record of this creature is contained in a voluminous file of sightings marked 'The Little Panther.' Only there is no such thing as a little panther—not one that stays the size of this animal year after year.

Panthers run from 7 to 8 feet from nose to tail end. This creature is a third that size. It is also sleek black. Panthers are tawny.

If all these sightings were reported only by tourists, as many were, they wouldn't add up to much of a mystery. But scientists, rangers and wild life authorities in number have also attested to seeing this strange animal. They have no idea what it is.

A typical ranger report from Coot Bay Station, dated June 11, 1951, reads:

'Maxwell, J. Parker and B. Parker on duty here A. M. On

way down a large dark-colored long-tailed cat was observed near West Lake. Panther?’

Ernst Christensen, chief park naturalist, points out two interesting features in that observation. The reference to ‘cat’ means a wild cat or bobcat, which definitely does not have a long tail.

Also, panthers are not dark.

Christensen himself has seen the creature a number of times, once when he was in the company of Dade Thornton, wildlife photographer and local naturalist.

Their joint report at the sight of this weird animal was summed up briefly: ‘Damned interesting.’

Some viewers have described it as a jaguarundi of unusual size. Christensen disagrees immediately with this possibility. Though this would make the creature of a size nearly agreeing with all the other reports, the jaguarundi has unusually short front legs.

The creature does not. Also, jaguarundi is a native of Mexico and southern Texas. It would have had to cross the Mississippi to get here.

Another theory is that it is an ocelot, which comes from the same area as the jaguarundi, that has gone through a melanistic or darkening phase.

This darkening process, which can occur in men and animals exposed to tropical heat, takes many generations. It would mean the creature and its relatives have been here for a long time.

A third theory is that it is a very large feral cat. That means a very large domestic cat has gone wild or possibly is the offspring of a mating between a bobcat and an ordinary cat which produced the long tail.

A fourth is the most spectacular and interesting of all. That, says Christensen, is that the creature is some kind of animal new to science.

I sent FOIA requests to Everglades National Park, with no results. That may indicate any locally maintained records were thrown out after so many years, or are just not accessible. Archive.org does have scans of some

monthly reports of the park naturalist for Everglades National Park (NPS 1949-1959). These are only very brief notes, but the little black panther shows up twice:

March 2, 1956: "The famous 'black panther' in the west lake area was observed by two members of the Naturalist staff. Observation was at such close range that certain features were clearly discernable. The panther very definitely is a dark-colored cat-like animal with a long tail and is about one-half the size of a full-grown cougar. It will prove interesting to fully record this animal."

November 2, 1956: "Two observation records of small dark panther were made by Engineer Mikell."

Van Smith, Howard. 1960. "Glades creature stirs up mystery." *The Miami (FL) News* (Jan. 24)

National Park Service. 1949-59. Chief Park Naturalist Report. <https://archive.org/stream/chiefparknatural4959unse#page/n495>

A MYSTERY BLACK SNAKE

Jan Roth, a naturalist residing near Lay, Colorado, wrote a newspaper article in 2015 that brought together reports of a moderate-sized black snake, ostensibly similar to eastern North America's black racer, from the area ranging from Savery, Wyoming, south past Craig, Colorado, all the way to Meeker, and west to Browns Park, going back to 1986. (Basically, this is the northwestern tip of Colorado.) Roth believed that "The species we're looking for appears to prefer Oak brush and serviceberry ecozones close to creeks or running water between 6,500 and 7,500 feet in elevation." Roth noted that it could be a new species or a range extension of a known species, though he didn't suggest any possibilities. There are only a few racer-like snakes in Colorado. Yellow-bellied racers seem an unlikely culprit as they aren't black, and coachwhips are not found anywhere near that part of the state. (If coachwhips had somehow been introduced, that might be a possible explanation, as some individuals can be melanistic, but it's certainly not the dominant color phenotype, so further evidence is necessary.)

Roth, Jan. 2015. Jack Rabbit Road and the mystery snake. Craig, CO, *Daily Press* (Feb. 27) <http://www.craigdailynews.com/news/2015/feb/27/jan-roth-jack-rabbit-road-and-mystery-snake/>

LUMINOUS CATERPILLARS OF AUSTRALIA

I noted in *Cryptozoology and the Investigation of Lesser-Known Mysterious Animals* (2006) that there were cases of suspected bioluminescent spiders. Even more intriguing is a suspected luminous moth in Springbrook, Queensland, Australia. The late bioluminescence researcher Garry Maguire first discovered what he thought were just glow worms high in the trees, back in 1998. They turned out to be caterpillars. He noted, "On closer inspection the tail glows continuously and when disturbed and in motion the head, tail and the whole digestive tract of the caterpillar exudes bioluminescence in the blue/green spectrum not unlike a neon tube." Early caterpillars live down under the surface of the forest soil and leaf litter, and only move to the surface to graze when they are more mature. Maguire noted they were very mobile and could disappear into the ground quickly. Captured caterpillars developed into luminous pupae. For a time, Maguire suspected that these were simply larvae of a local firefly, but by 2006 noted that they were identified as the caterpillars of an as yet unidentified moth. Maguire noted that there were historical records of settlers in the area who had described a luminous moth (circa 1914), but he had never heard of anyone spotting such a lepidopteran in recent times. Unfortunately, I learned while trying to contact him for further information that Garry Maguire died just in the last couple of years, and there is no one currently attempting to continue his research into this mystery.

https://web.archive.org/web/20080724104930/http://springbrook.info/research/luminous_caterpillars.htm

GOLD COAST PIPEFISH

Diver Ian Banks photographed an unusual pipefish in the Gold Coast Seaway of Australia in November, 2009. US biologists ran across the photo online and realized it was a possible new species. A trip to the Seaway in 2014 was unsuccessful; poor weather conditions made conditions difficult. A trip in search for the pipefish was planned for late 2015.

Larkins, Damien. 2014. Pipefish photo sparks international search. (Nov. 25) <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/11/25/4135417.htm>
Short, Graham. 2015. Expedition to find rare pipefish in Queensland Australia. (May 16) <http://sciworthy.com/science-news/expedition-to-find-rare-pipefish-in-queensland-australia/>

THE DESERT RAT-KANGAROO

The oolacunta, or desert rat-kangaroo (*Caloprymnus campestris*), is a small marsupial first described in 1843 from an unknown location in South Australia. It was not seen again until 1931, when several specimens were collected over the next few years in the far north-east of South Australia. A few reports of the species were collected from the 1970s and 1980s, but field researchers were unable to find a trace of the species during the 1990s and 2000s, and it was believed to have gone extinct. Robinson and Forrest (2011) detailed a possible sighting of this marsupial in the Peake Hill Mine area by a member of a nature group party camping by the river. The possible re-discovery is one of many interesting discovery narratives that could be told about Australian wildlife. (For example, there's the bridled nail-tailed wallaby, *Onychogalea fraenata*, thought to have disappeared by the 1930s, but rediscovered in Queensland in 1973 when a fencing contractor recognized the species from an illustration reprinted in a Woman's Day magazine (Gordon and Lawrie 1980).)

Gordon, G., and B. C. Lawrie. 1980. The rediscovery of the bridled nail-tailed wallaby, *Onychogalea fraenata* (Gould) (Marsupialia: Macropodidae) in Queensland. *Australian Wildlife Research* 7: 339-345.

Robinson, Tony, and Tiana Forrest. 2012. A possible sighting of the desert rat-kangaroo or oolacunta (*Caloprymnus campestris*) on the Peake Station, South Australia. *South Australian Naturalist* 86(2): 63-75.

ARCTIC PYGMY SEALS

Philippe Coudray, author of *Guide des Animaux Cachés*, has provided an English translation of that book in PDF form (at <http://www.philippe-coudray.com/Pages/A-guidebook-to-hidden-animals.html>). One account particularly intrigued me (the Arctic pygmy seal from the Barents Sea) as I have previously noted a report of pygmy seals in the Canadian

Arctic Islands (Arment 2004). Philippe kindly forwarded his source for the Barents Sea account, *Les Survivants de L'ombre* (by Jean-Jacques Barloy, Arthaud, 1985), along with a translation: “Danish, Norwegian and German seafarers are familiar with pigmy seal bands that live off the coasts of the Sea of Barents, between Norway, Svalbard and Siberia. However, these seals remain enigmatic. According to Roland Heu, Vice-President of the French Arctic Society, these seals are likely a subspecies of the ringed seal (*Pusa hispida pygmaea*). It was described from a specimen held at the beginning of the century at the Hamburg Zoo. The pygmy seal only measured seventy-three centimeters. Bands of three hundred seals are formed, which is not the case with other ringed seals. In addition, this subspecies is very alert, hence the names ‘seal-phantom’, or ‘seal-gnome’ that the sailors give it. Is its small size due to undernourishment? And why this change in behavior? These questions remain unanswered.” It turns out that the *P. h. pygmaea* specimen was at Carl Hagenbeck’s zoo and described in 1914. This subspecies appears to have been synonymized with *P. h. hispida* (Scheffer 1958). Images of the original 1914 living specimen can be seen in the paper, “Beitrag zur Kenntnis von *Pusa hispida pygmaea*,” available online at http://www.zobodat.at/pdf/Archiv-Naturgeschichte_87A_10_0183-0199.pdf.

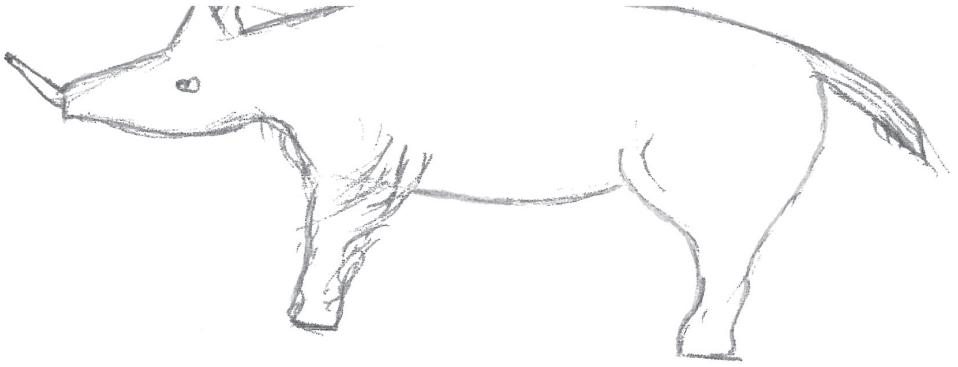
Arment, Chad. 2004. *Cryptozoology: Science & Speculation*. Landisville, PA: Coachwhip.

Scheffer, Victor B. 1958. *Seals, Sea Lions, and Walruses: A Review of the Pinnipedia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

MANITOBA ‘PIG WITH A TUSK’

John Warms has collected a wide range of cryptozoological reports from his home province of Manitoba (Warms 2015). One that caught my attention involved a “pig with a tusk” that was reported primarily in northern Manitoba (hunters from both Pukatawagan and Nelson House being familiar with the animal). It is reported to be pig-like in basic form, black, but not as thickly coated with hair as a wild boar. It did not have split hooves, but rather left a flat round track. A seven- to eight-inch horn protruded from the end of the snout. Habitat-wise, it seemed to be found in areas with water nearby that reportedly didn’t freeze.

Pigs have cloven hooves, and leave distinctive tracks, and obviously don’t have horns on their snouts. I’m not a fan of pushing unverifiable



“Pig with a tusk” sketched by an eyewitness.
(Courtesy John Warms)

identities on biological unknowns, but there are small fossil rhinos in the North American fossil record that show similarities to this overall description. (*Menoceras*, for example, was pig-sized. Interestingly, it and the related genus *Diceratherium* had small paired horns at the end of their snouts.) Unlike the cold-adapted woolly rhino, these smaller fossil rhinos were known from warmer climates, though as Karl Shuker notes in his recently revised *Still in Search of Prehistoric Survivors* (2016), it is difficult to gauge from the fossil record exactly what adaptations an organism might present if its descendents survived to modern times.

Shuker, Karl. 2016. *Still in Search of Prehistoric Survivors*. Greenville, OH: Coachwhip.

Warms, John. 2015. *Strange Creatures Seldom Seen*. Greenville, OH: Coachwhip.